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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: NORWEGIAN ENVOYS' VISIT BRINGS NO  
FRESH INITIATIVES ON THE PEACE FRONT--BUT A HINT OF A WAY  
FORWARD?

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

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SUMMARY

1. (C) The November 10-11 visit of Norwegian Foreign Minister Jan Petersen, Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen and Special Envoy Erik Solheim has brought much talk about the peace process but little actual progress. There were no major breakthroughs, but the Tigers might respond positively if the President can issue a statement of support for resumed talks endorsed by her entire government--including the JVP. The Foreign Minister is working hard on the JVP to bring them around to accept a common position. Helgesen noted to Ambassador that there is no sign of a desire by either the Government or the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to return to war. Both, in fact, want to return to talks. The difference is that the Government is more eager than the LTTE, and wants a broader agenda, while the LTTE is less eager and wants an "ISGA-only" agenda. For the first time in Sri Lankan history, the Opposition supports the Government in entering negotiations--a unique opportunity. The Ambassador also met November 11 with Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and Peace Secretariat Head Jayantha Dhanapala. Wickremesinghe had a cordial meeting with the President on November 2 and reaffirmed his support for peace talks based on the ISGA and the Oslo Declaration, but continues to refuse to participate in the President's National Advisory Council on peace. Both the LTTE and the UNP question whether the President is committed more to peace or to a constitutional change which will allow her to continue in power. End summary.

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DHANAPALA WANTS LTTE COMMITMENT

2. (C) During a November 10 meeting with the Ambassador, Jayantha Dhanapala, head of the Peace Secretariat, was not overly optimistic regarding Petersen's visit. (Note: Norwegian Foreign Minister Petersen was in Sri Lanka November 10-11.) He doubted that a breakthrough in returning to talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) would be achieved during the visit. Dhanapala anticipated that the November 26 Heroes' Day speech by Prabhakaran, which will coincide with Prabhakaran's 50th birthday, could be an important policy statement. Dhanapala said that the Tigers need to acknowledge their commitment to the peace process and its continuity between Sri Lankan governments. To that end, Dhanapala said the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) is willing to agree that the previous government's July 2003 proposal to the Tigers is still on the table. The GSL also wants the LTTE to reaffirm its agreement in Oslo in December 2002 to explore a federal solution within a unified Sri Lanka. A positive statement to that effect, even by the Norwegians, would suffice, Dhanapala indicated. He thought that the return of London-based Tiger theoretician Anton Balasingham for the high-level Norwegian visit was a good sign, opining that the LTTE leadership in the Wanni does not adequately understand the international situation.

3. (C) Discussing domestic politics and its impact on the peace process, the Ambassador mentioned that some in the international community have the perception that disputes among Sinhalese political parties in the south present a real stumbling block to President Kumaratunga's ability to move forward with negotiations. Dhanapala noted that the President's November 2 meeting with Opposition Leader and head of the United National Party (UNP) Ranil Wickremesinghe had gone well. He described the President as optimistic about future meetings and confident that the UNP would join in discussions in the GSL's National Advisory Council (NAC), created by the President to discuss the peace process in different fora. He said the President was pleased with the inaugural meeting of the Council on October 4, adding that subsequent meetings of political, religious, and civil society subgroups had been substantive and productive. Further, Dhanapala said that Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar and Information Minister Mangala Samaraweera are working with the GSL's main alliance partner, the Janatha

Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), to educate its members and lay the groundwork for the GSL's return to talks with the Tigers.

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OPPOSITION VIEWPOINT  
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14. (C) Ambassador also met on November 10 with Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of Sri Lanka's United National Party (UNP). On his meeting with President Kumaratunga, Wickremesinghe said that his response to the President's request that he participate in the NAC was that he has not changed his position of withholding participation until peace talks with the LTTE commence. He told the Ambassador that he sees the NAC as irrelevant until peace talks restart. When queried whether the NAC was an attempt by President Kumaratunga to put pressure on the JVP, Wickremesinghe responded that he would support her if she decides to begin peace talks with or without the JVP. First, however, she needs to decide on her own future. Wickremesinghe said again that the UNP is always available to talk about the peace process, but that now the economy is the key question--not the peace process. He does not want the public to lose focus on the budget and the deteriorating state of the economy, which he believes will be a strong issue in favor of the UNP. Ambassador told Wickremesinghe that based on his contacts with a wide range of Sri Lankans, the UNP had hurt itself by its refusal to participate in the NAC. Sri Lankans do not understand why the UNP refused to join this process to build a national consensus for peace, the Ambassador added.

15. (C) Wickremesinghe said he told the President that there are in fact two proposals on the table: the LTTE's Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) and the previous government's proposal on an interim administration. Her government could simply pick up where things had been left off. The GSL could start talks based on the ISGA and then introduce its own proposal along the way. Wickremesinghe believes that the President needs to decide if she will take on the JVP--which opposes resuming talks on the basis of the ISGA--and create a bipartisan process.

16. (C) Returning to the economy, Wickremesinghe said that the GSL is trapped by its own rhetoric. He said that the UNP is telling the GSL it needs to implement the 70 percent salary increase for government employees that it promised during the election. He does not see how the GSL can pay for a SLR 3,000 (Note: approximately USD 30) per month increase, adding that even the UNP had trouble paying an increase one-third that size when it came to power. He believes the President is in a difficult position. Cutting spending could spell political disaster for her. Increasing borrowings, on the other hand, would also be disastrous. Wickremesinghe sees the worldwide increase in oil prices as particularly bad for the government's budget. The UNP plans to begin a campaign against the budget, which could include street protests.

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NORWEGIAN FM LEAVES EARLY;  
MISSES DINNER  
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17. (C) Norwegian Foreign Minister Jan Petersen met President Kumaratunga on November 10, helicoptered to LTTE headquarters in Kilinochchi to meet LTTE chieftain Prabhakaran November 11, met Kumaratunga again that same evening, but was unable to attend a dinner later that evening hosted by Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar for key Chiefs of Mission because of his early departure from Sri Lanka to attend Yasir Arafat's funeral. Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen and Special Envoy Erik Solheim, who had arrived November 9, were present at the dinner, however. Ambassador asked Helgesen if Kumaratunga had given Petersen any special message to take to Prabhakaran. Helgesen replied that she had not, and that this was a bit disappointing. After all, he said, Petersen had come to Sri Lanka based on a specific request from Kumaratunga.

18. (C) During the dinner, Kadirgamar reprised to Ambassador many of Dhanapala's earlier themes. He thought that the meeting between the President and Wickremesinghe had gone very well, noting that they had even been able to issue a joint communique afterwards. He held out hope that the UNP would still join the NAC, saying that after the meeting, Wickremesinghe had held open the possibility, promising to go back and consult his party. Ambassador told him that he believed Wickremesinghe was still firm that the UNP would not participate in the NAC. He also said that he thought that one reason was that Wickremesinghe was concerned that the President might still try to implement constitutional changes through transforming Parliament into a constituent assembly operating through a simple majority. As long as he felt threatened by that, he would be less eager to assist Kumaratunga in the peace process. Interestingly, Kadirgamar,

who is a prominent attorney, made no attempt to defend the constitutional change proposal.

19. (C) Kadirgamar said Prabhakaran told Petersen that in order for negotiations to start, Kumaratunga needed to make a public statement which would have the full support of her government, i.e., including the JVP. This should happen before the Heroes' Day speech. Kadirgamar told the Ambassador that the GSL needs to have agreement from the Tigers that the negotiations, while based on the ISGA, are part of a broader framework. Kadirgamar said that he was indeed working hard on the JVP and that they "have come an incredibly long way." (Note: Kadirgamar always says this about the JVP. End note.) He said that he had brought them "80 percent along" on peace issues. It was possible that the President might be able soon to make an address to the nation on peace on behalf of the entire government with JVP concurrence, the Foreign Minister said.

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VIEW FROM TIGERS  
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10. (U) On November 11 the pro-LTTE website TamilNet carried a statement from Balasingham complaining that "President Kumaratunga has sent no new message through the Norwegian Foreign Minister. She has only reiterated her stand that there should be talks on a permanent political solution." Balasingham said that the Tigers sent a message to the President via the Norwegian envoys on how talks could be resumed. Balasingham was also quoted in the international media on November 12 as saying "It is not possible to find a permanent solution under this government," and that despite the Norwegians' visit, "no progress has been made on the political level." Press comments that the Norwegians carried a "secret proposal" from the LTTE to Kumaratunga appear to be based on these statements.

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HELGESEN/SOLHEIM BRIEF DIPLOMATIC CORPS  
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11. (C) On November 12 Helgesen and Solheim briefed the entire diplomatic corps over lunch. (Note: This was a departure from normal practice, as the Norwegians generally brief only the major donors/international organizations/IFIs, not the entire corps. End note.) Helgesen was studiously vague in his briefing to this larger group. However, Ambassador was able to have semi-private discussions with both Helgesen and Solheim on the margins of the lunch. Helgesen confirmed that he had carried a message from the LTTE that they would like Kumaratunga to issue a statement of support for the negotiations (based on ISGA) on behalf of her entire government--including the JVP. Would that make the Tigers more flexible in return, perhaps willing to make a commitment to explore a federal solution, Ambassador asked? "That is the hope," Helgesen said. He also said that he had conveyed two major points to the LTTE. First, this is a unique opportunity for progress. The President is eager to move ahead, she wants to bring the JVP along, and she has the support of the main Opposition--a completely unique moment in Sri Lankan history. Second, the perception of the international community is that the President is being flexible and the LTTE is not. Combined with concern about the LTTE killings, this is costing the LTTE. Nonetheless, both Helgesen and Solheim said, the President senses an urgency to return to talks, the LTTE much less so.

12. (C) Ambassador asked Helgesen if the Norwegians had raised with the President the issue of her desire for constitutional change and how that could affect the peace process. Helgesen said they had, and it had "provoked" her. She asked if the Norwegians had faith in her government. She also said that the two were separate issues. She did not, however, answer the question directly.

13. (C) Helgesen concluded his public briefing by saying that he had not come with any great expectations, and that viewpoint had been borne out. Nonetheless, there was no sign of a desire by either side to return to war. Both, in fact, want to return to talks. The difference is that the Government is more eager than the LTTE, and wants a broader agenda, while the LTTE is less eager and wants an "ISGA-only" agenda. Helgesen said that he was not overly optimistic, but he sensed an increasing realization by both sides that if they don't seize the moment now, there may be a long stalemate with a consequent uncertainty which may not benefit them. The President has a unique ability to mobilize the South for peace, he said--the question for concerned countries was how to encourage her to take the bold steps to do so. Ambassador asked Solheim what would happen if the President issued a statement endorsed by her entire government showing a willingness to go back to talks based on the ISGA, and the Tigers then refused. Solheim looked startled and said: "That would be a total betrayal by the LTTE of the Norwegian trust."

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COMMENT  
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14. (C) As expected, there were no breakthroughs from this visit. The Tiger desire to see--and Kumaratunga's apparent willingness to consider--a statement on behalf of the entire Government supporting the negotiations could show a way forward, if it can be pulled off. The JVP's unwillingness to consider the ISGA as the "sole basis" remains a major sticking point, however, and we don't know if the President will be able to get the JVP to come around far enough for that to be a workable strategy. Moreover, even if the JVP were to come around, the real wild card remains what it has always been--the dependability of the Tigers as a negotiating partner. The cordial meeting between Ranil Wickremasinghe and the President and his continued willingness to support her in negotiations are hopeful signs, even if he continues to refuse to join the NAC.

LUNSTEAD